The Future of Human Nature and Social Progress:

A Case for Optimism in an Age of Despair

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

Corey N. Regan

Thesis Advisor

Andrea Powell Wolfe

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

September, 2016

Expected Date of Graduation

July, 2016

Abstract

When discussing the topic of social progress and possible futures, a common argument is that so-called "utopian" ideas are implausible due to the limitations of human nature. This paper attempts to explain the faults in that argument by pointing out common flaws in the typical understanding of "human nature" and the history and direction of social progress. The belief that human nature is universal and constant is countered by evidence that human psychology and behavior are largely culturally formed and change across time and geography due to macro-cultural factors. Furthermore, social progress has continually advanced throughout history, despite modern skepticism, and maintains a positive trajectory to this day. With these two arguments, it can be concluded that, as societies become more pro-social, human nature itself will follow suit, changing the limitations of human nature and thus the potentials for social progress.

Keywords: human nature, social progress, cultural psychology

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Andrea Powell Wolfe for advising me throughout this project and for all of her time and effort reading and editing my work. Special thanks again to Andrea Powell Wolfe as well as my close friends and family for pushing me to not give up and complete this project. I don't know what I would have done without the many people who supported me, and I appreciate them all ceaselessly.

The Future of Human Nature and Social Progress:
A Case for Optimism in an Age of Despair

In a review in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, senior art critic Kenneth Baker described *Manufactured Landscapes* (Baichwall, 2006) as a film primarily focused on the "scale, tempo and irreversibility of postmodern humanity's global frenzy of production and consumption" (LaSalle, Baker, & Grady, 2007). Through its ironically beautiful yet nonetheless eerie cinematography, the film highlights the work of photographer Edward Burtynsky, exposing the mountains of technological waste and military-like camps of factory workers that have risen, out of privileged sight, to sustain the consumerism of the developed world. Its portrayal of these unforeseen byproducts of the first world, shoveled onto the underprivileged working class of third world countries, can definitely leave its viewers with a sense of despair and skepticism towards the Westernized notion of social progress, or so was the general consensus amongst my group of friends, dismally gathered on a cold January Thursday for our weekly movie night. An optimistic futurist myself, I found the group's discussion on social progress to be rather disheartening, despite my desperate attempts to retort with uplifting evidence. But while the conversation inevitably diverted from one topic to another, the general course of the discussion led to an interesting question: Is social progress limited by the flaws of human nature? More specifically, are social issues such as discrimination, industrial exploitation, and political corruption doomed to forever plague our societies due to mankind's inexorable tendency towards selfishness, in-group favoritism, and other flaws within our nature? As a student of the psychological sciences with interests in social progress and reform, I realized that understanding this question requires both an accurate comprehension of human nature and its limitations and a broad cross-cultural and historical understanding of social progress. While the opinions of my

family and friends proved to be rather cynical on this matter, I found that much of their dismay stemmed from several misconceptions about these two subjects. To resolve these misconceptions and hopefully shed light on this question, I decided to posit two axioms and a prediction: human nature is socially sculpted, social progress has continually risen, and thus, as societies become more pro-social, so will the way humans perceive, evaluate, and react to the world.

Human Nature Is Socially Sculpted

Any discussion regarding an inherent human nature yields itself to the perils of a false dialectic that has plagued our understanding of human psychology for centuries. In fact, the very term "human nature" itself exemplifies this critical misconception. While much of the field of psychology has dedicated its efforts towards elucidating the age-old question of "nature versus nurture," this dialectic is itself an essential flaw in our understanding of human behavior and cognition. In truth, humans are, by nature, social beings, and to mitigate the importance of socialization in defining human cognition and behavior is to ignore the very means by which the human psyche is organized and shaped during development. While the field of psychology, overall, has remained rather ethnocentric in its endeavor to identify and describe the almost mythical essence of "human nature," cross-cultural and cultural psychology have revealed that socialization through *culture* actually plays a tremendous role in shaping how humans perceive, evaluate, and react to the world. In other words, human nature is not some uniform, "natural" constant, but a vastly transmutable substance that is shaped through socially enforced values, worldviews, and behaviors, which vary between different cultures. Of course, there are still some limitations due to our biology and neurology -- even a "tabula rasa" is limited by the physical nature of the slate itself -- but the common misconception that human cognition, emotion, and behavior are universal and static plagues our understanding of social progress and what is or is

not possible due to human greed, prejudice, and other flaws. Thankfully, the promising view of human nature as a socially defined phenomenon is evidenced in numerous ways.

The necessity of socialization in shaping the human psyche is perhaps most obvious when considering feral children studies. If there were some baseline "human nature," stripped of the effects of socialization, it would be most purely observed in those raised outside of all human contact. While such instances are extremely rare and thus research on the matter limited to only a few case studies and historical accounts, the necessity of socialization becomes visibly evident when considering the near animalistic behavior exhibited by humans raised in the wilderness, apart from human contact. Interestingly enough, most feral children studied show similar habits, including an aversion to cooked food and being inside and, perhaps most importantly, difficulty or inability to speak. Without the ability to speak, even with instruction, most feral children show few signs of complex, abstract thought (Candland, 2003). This trend is of particular note because, according to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, the structure of the languages that we use influence the way that we think. Thinking about and understanding a topic is fundamentally difficult if not impossible when one does not have words to represent that concept, especially in regard to abstract concepts such as love, religion, time, or even empathy. Likewise, the particular content and connotations of words and the grammar of any given language influence the way humans comprehend, relate, and react to aspects of the world around them. Thus, the presence of certain advanced cognitive functions, such as language, is reliant on socialization during development and influences the comprehension and expression of complex thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Likewise, our abstract understandings of empathy, goodness, evil, right, and wrongdoing are influenced by socialization and the content of language that we use. Furthermore, in rare cases when animals such as dogs or monkeys fostered the child, feral

children often learned to behave in ways similar to the animals that raised them. Examples of such include John Ssebunya, a Ugandan boy who was raised by monkeys, and Oxana Malaya, a Ukranian girl who lived outside with her dogs, both of whom exhibited the traits of their fosters (Candland, 2003). This sort of impressionability demonstrates how behavior is learned through observation and socialization, both verbally and through behavioral modeling. If behavior is so easily adopted to fit the behavioral norms of animals and cognition so reliant on verbalization, then it is entirely reasonable to believe that the behavioral norms and beliefs of any given society largely dictate the behavior and values of individuals within those societies. In this way, our comprehension and interaction with the world is, at least to some significant degree, socially learned and can vary greatly between people, suggesting that understanding the norms of a society, culture, or specific region are crucial to understanding and predicting the different values and behaviors that humans learn from them.

Unfortunately, much of the field of psychology has largely ignored the importance of socialization through culture when attempting to distinguish aspects of "human nature". In one analysis, researchers found that 96% of subjects in a large sample of psychological studies came from Western industrialized countries, particularly those within North America and Europe, with 68% being from the United States alone. This clear bias has lead researchers to generalize findings based on samples from countries that only reflect about 12% of the world's population (Arnett, 2008). Furthermore, when tested in a number of psychological domains associated with motivation and behavior, a review of research shows that members of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies, also known as WEIRD subjects, were among the least representative populations from which to generalize, compared to the rest of the world. This is heightened by the fact that college undergraduates, who are hardly representative within their

own countries, make up about 67% of subjects in the US and 80% in other WEIRD countries (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Combined, these overwhelming sample biases make the majority of psychological subjects "not just an extraordinarily restricted sample of humanity" but "frequently a distinct outlier vis-a`-vis other global samples" (82).

By adhering to a vastly ethnocentric data pool, the psychological sciences have mostly ignored cross-cultural differences and instead focused on describing the behaviors, emotions, and thought patterns of mostly white, European, and American subjects, yet generalized the results from these demographics into theoretical explanations for a singular "human nature". Recent research in the past few decades, however, has aided in pointing out this crucial methodological flaw in the field of psychology. Our understanding of color perception, for example, was deeply challenged and broadened by the findings that prehistoric and some indigenous groups of people lack the ability to distinguish certain colors such as blue and green or vary in their chromatic distinctions (Phillips, 2011). Our scientific understanding of human neurological development, on a physical level, comes under scrutiny when considering cross-cultural differences that challenge Piaget's stages of child development (Molitor & Hsu, 2011), or organizational differences between eastern and western brain hemispheres that disappear when a person from one ethnic group is raised in another culture. Cultural differences in not only the way we express, but, also, the way we experience emotions radically challenge our understanding of human emotion within the field of psychology (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2011). Yet these examples only cover the most basic perceptual, emotional, cognitive, or structural differences within human psychology. Perhaps more importantly, the values, beliefs, and behaviors that humans have, support, and engage in vary greatly between cultures as well. For instance, moral attitudes towards non-heteronormative sexuality and non-binary gender are mostly cultural. Gender norms

and the expression of sexuality can vary greatly across cultures and time (Littleford & Kite, 2011). These differences in attitudes and beliefs directly affect human behavior in different cultures and can largely account for whether or not populations are more hostile or accepting of people that do not fit traditional Western norms, as well as how often issues such as queer sexuality and gender are publically expressed. Political stance and the support or rejection of various types of government vary greatly across the world, as do religious beliefs and worldviews, which influence legislation in any given region. Perceptions of violence in the world are skewed by media representation and violent television (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980), which occurs at varying rates in different countries. Similarly, beliefs of human morality, whether humans are inherently good or evil, or whether they should be free or can't be trusted, can often be largely rooted in local religious beliefs, and affect political attitudes and the support or opposition and success of various government programs. Yet cultural differences do not end there; the behaviors of individuals vary across cultures as well. For instance, the fact that different countries have different rates of aggressive crime signifies that aggression rates among humans vary across cultures. Hate crime rates, as a product of prejudice which varies across groups and regions, vary across the world as well. In fact, "human nature" as a whole varies in everything from mental health and suicide rates to rates of altruism and volunteering across the world. Clearly, human psychology and its behaviors and flaws are not solely reducible to some biological, inherent, and static "nature". As cross-cultural and cultural psychology have demonstrated, peoples' psychologies are very much shaped by the differing values, beliefs, and behavioral norms by which they are socialized. Variations between countries are not signs of individual psychological differences, but, instead, cultural differences that account for these trends when viewed from a macro scale. In this way, understanding human "nature" and its

potentials and limitations therein requires understanding how aspects of different cultures shape our thoughts, emotions, beliefs, values, and behaviors. The importance of different aspects of culture and their effects on human psychology directly tie the topics of human nature and social progress, and understanding how different norms of a society specifically shape human psychology in certain ways can allow us to shape culture in ways that support more pro-social societies and thus a more pro-social future for humankind.

Macro-Cultural Psychology and the Role of Culture

When viewed from a macro scale, it is clear that demographic variances in psychological variables cannot be explained through natural, inherent, psychological differences amongst different groups of people, across regions and time. Differing suicide rates in Sweden and Japan, for example, do not signify neurological differences in depressive thinking between Swedish and Japanese people. Likewise, differing aggressive crime rates between Iceland and the U.S. do not result from differing biological levels of aggression between Icelandic and American citizens, neither do intelligence measures, prejudice scores, or personality traits. This is not to say that individual, biological differences do not contribute to such issues, but rather that differences on a macro scale, above all else, are mostly based on differences in macro-cultural factors. Regardless, variations in human thought and behavior are clearly not reducible to genetic differences, or differences in "nature". It is clear that differences in socialization, or "nurture", must play a large role in determining demographic differences in psychology, yet much of the psychological literature regarding socialization fails to explain these demographic differences as well. This is because social psychology, for most of the past century, has viewed socialization from a rather limited, ethnocentric perspective, rather than a broader, cultural one. Differences in social factors on a larger, cultural scale, on the other hand, can very well explain demographic

differences between cultures. However, in order to distinguish the ways that cultural differences influence human psychology, the term "culture" and its many facets must be defined.

Depending on the context, the term "culture" can have many different meanings. Yet even within the context of sociology and psychology, the term can be broadly defined. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary provides several varying definitions for culture, but in summary, culture in this intended context is the integrated pattern of customary beliefs, behaviors, social norms, arts, and material traits of any particular society, place, time, or group of people, including but not limited to racial, religious, or social groups (2011). While this explanation of culture is rather comprehensive, a much more specific definition is still needed in order to examine the many aspects of culture and how they affect human psychology. According to macro-cultural psychologist Carl Ratner, culture can be broken down into three kinds of macro factors for this very purpose. These three categories of macro-cultural factors, which serve as the social, physical, and ideational cornerstones of society, include institutions, artifacts, and cultural concepts. To elaborate, any given society or culture has its own institutions, such as different religions, forms of education, systems of government, economic establishments, or systems of health care, which demand and thus perpetuate certain values and behaviors from its citizens. For example, the modern system of formal education demands certain characteristics, such as the ability to sit for long periods of time, listen to authoritative instruction, follow class rules, and remain obedient to course structures. These values also align with the demands of the industrial capitalist workplace, which should come as no surprise considering that the modern system of formal education is very much suited to fit the needs of industrial societies and thus perpetuates these qualities. In contrast, the more traditional method of apprenticeship offers a more hands on, individualized experience that enforces drastically different qualities in a

prospective student, better suited for individualized forms of work where production is owned by the workers, often found in societies where localized trade and small businesses are more normative. In a similar fashion, the institution of a Democratic Republic form of government does not require an actively informed public, but relies instead on trust in representatives, while a more pure Democracy more strongly demands that citizens educate themselves on issues in order to vote on each issue at hand. By demanding different values and behaviors, different institutions in any given society enforce their respective values and behaviors and thus create a culture based on those characteristics. This is also true of cultural artifacts, which include physical objects such as tools, food, clothing, art, or forms of housing. It is well known in the field of Art History that the art and material goods of a society reflect the values and beliefs of that society, which can be used as insight for understanding historical cultures. Likewise, the art and materials of modern societies also provide insight on the values and behavioral norms of modern cultures because these materials themselves affect cultural norms. The use of animals instead of machines in harvesting agriculture undoubtedly affects relationships with and thus sympathy for animals in an agrarian society. The use of digital over personal communication shapes the way humans read, communicate, and think. In similar fashion, a society's cultural concepts, or its understandings and beliefs on sexuality, gender, mortality, time, space, even color perception, affect how people comprehend and interact with each other and the world around them (Ratner, 2006).

In this way, "Culture is a system in which our products produce us, we are made by what we make, and human objectifications objectify consciousness in particular ways" (Ratner, 2006, p. 13). In other words, cultural factors reflect the psychological makeup of their creators, but in the process, demand and sustain those psychological characteristics, thus influencing human

psychology themselves. This is true not only of physical artifacts and societal institutions, but of certain cognitive functions as well. One could even argue that cultural developments not only correlate with, but are also responsible for the intellectual development of mankind in numerous ways. From an evolutionary perspective, it could be argued that culture itself forms to sustain and develop traits that meet the demands of that time and place, which would have aided in survival throughout early human history. Conversely, one could then argue that human cognition, emotion, beliefs, and behaviors are, in actuality, reliant on culture, which has progressed for millennia to develop and sustain our capacities for complex psychological functions such as language and analytical reasoning. As Ratner explains, "the historical development of language proceeds from strings of words to complex, grammatical sentences, just as the ontogenetic development of language does . . . The limited language of early human adults was due to cultural immaturity, not biological immaturity. Early human adults possessed the same neuroanatomy as modern adults. They had the biological capacity to learn advanced language; however, they lacked the cultural foundation" (2006, p. 17). While this view of human nature as a social construct has only recently begun to lay roots in the scientific community, these ideas are by no means new. Numerous influential thinkers from the 19th century, from Lev Vygotsky to Carl Marx, drew their ideas from a socio-cultural perspective. Like Ratner, Vygostky even stated that "Higher mental functions [are] the *product* of the historical development of humanity" (2004, p. 420). Marx's philosophy of historical materialism, on the other hand, elaborated on this view of culture by proposing that, because humans fulfill themselves through social activities and artifacts, consciousness is inherently wired to construct, maintain, and refine cultural practices, artifacts, beliefs, and institutions (Ratner, 2006, p. 36). In this way, Marx's view of culture is consistent with Ratner's argument that cultural artifacts affect

society, but more importantly, it elaborates on how culture exists not only as a cause, but a product of human consciousness as well. In these ways, the norms of human cognition and behavior are not only shaped by cultural factors, but also function to support, perpetuate, and even change aspects of culture itself. From this point of view, social progress and human nature are inherently linked in a cyclical relationship of cause and effect. With this in mind, questioning human nature and its limitations goes from a completely biological inquiry to a new question entirely: how have societies evolved, or how has social evolution changed humanity throughout history? While a species' biological evolution is an inescapably slow and immutable foundation, social evolution, though less stable, picks up the baton at a much greater pace, allowing mankind to change in many ways and at a much greater pace. While the future will always remain a mystery, examining human evolution from a social perspective may outline a trajectory for the current evolution of human consciousness, and thus, provide insight on how the potentials of social progress may change.

Humans and Human Societies Have Become More Pro-Social

Analyzing social progress throughout human history requires a vast amount of data about human societies across cultures and time. Unfortunately, the further back one ventures in history, the less specific information they will find. Since detailed information about prehistoric societies can often come up short, tracing the trajectory of social progress must start with tracing the trajectory of human evolution. For most animals, socialization plays an important role in survival. Because of this, evolution favors groups working together to survive, and social evolution "sustains the trajectory that biological evolution had established toward greater complexity" (Wright, 2006). In the case of humans, socialization has influenced the evolution of mankind to counter-select aggressive behavior out of the gene pool. Research on domestication

and its effects on psychology and physiology provide evidence for this trajectory throughout human evolution.

The process of domesticating an animal involves breeding a species to select out fearful and aggressive responses. However, this process also causes other physiological changes as a byproduct. In the case of foxes, for instance, evolutionary biologist Dr. Dmetry K. Belyaev has surprisingly found that after only 40 years of selective breeding, foxes were not only tamable, but showed a number of other unintended changes as well, such as floppy ears, smaller teeth, and different fur patterns. These changes were later found to occur due to slower rates of development involving the migration of neural crest cells, which affects the development of the adrenal gland, and in turn, a species' fear response. By selecting out fear and aggression, Belyaev was actually selecting foxes with slower neural crest cell migratory rates, resulting in pedomorphic changes. In other words, the process of domestication actually hinders the development of a species so they remain in an adolescent state in some ways. The other physiological changes occur because the neural crest cells also influence the development of the ears, teeth, and fur, amongst other things, and thus the development of these parts become halted. The domestication process has many other effects as well, such as higher level of serotonin, which affects aggression, and lower cortisol, which affects stress and fear responses (Wilkins, Wrangham, & Fitch, 2014). These same processes were also found to mirror the domestication of wolves into dogs. Perhaps more interesting, though, is that this process was also found to occur naturally, as a sort of self-domestication. Bonobos, for example, may have likely evolved from chimpanzees through this self-domestication process, just as humans evolved from chimpanzee ancestors. Bonobos were found do have shorter canines, muzzles, and reduced brain sizes compared to Chimpanzees, among other factors, all of which signaling the effects of

domestication. Most importantly, these changes can also be seen when comparing modern humans to human skulls dated from 30-50 thousand years ago. Modern humans, in comparison, were found to have physiological signs of self-domestication, such as smaller teeth, narrower bones, and shorter muzzles. Likewise, when compared to chimpanzees, modern humans display reactive aggression at nearly $1/1000^{th}$ the rate of their ancestral ape counterparts. According to Harvard University professor of biological anthropology Richard Wrangham, this self-selection against aggression likely occurred due to socialization. As socialization advanced amongst ancestral humans beings, humans began to utilize a process solely found in more cognitively advanced species: capital punishment. Unlike reactive aggression, which occurs in reaction to individual conflicts, capital punishment is a form of preemptive aggression, which involves the planned punishment of another individual. Reactive and preemptive aggression also rely on different neural pathways in the brain, so they are not mutually exclusive and can be counter-selected independently. Ironically, capital punishment is actually a social form of counter-dominance or counter-aggression. For example, if a member of a group displays violent aggression towards another member, and that victim is able to communicate to the rest of the group, the rest of the group may use capital punishment to either punish the attacker, or completely remove them from the group (Wrangham, 2014). This aids in the survival of the group because it selects out aggression both socially, through punishment, and physically, by removing aggressive members from the gene pool, creating an incentive for individuals to not behave aggressively or selfishly, thus increasing social cohesion.

Although this tradeoff for preemptive aggression may not seem like much progress, it is important to note that since capital punishment relies on communication with the group and social support, it is unlike reactive aggression because it is more of a social process than a

biological one. Because of these key differences, the rate of preemptive aggression in humans, such as murder or war, is not a static, limiting factor for social progress, unlike biological reactive aggression. Instead, the use of preemptive aggression played an important role in lowering the biological aggression of humans throughout evolution, but can be changed through cultural reform when no longer necessary. In other words, human evolution has not only decreased biological aggression, but has turned aggressive behavior into a mutable, cultural factor rather than a static, biological one, allowing for social progress and a potentially nonviolent humanity. In a way, the self-domestication of humans through social punishment can even be viewed as the beginning of a culturally enforced morality. As this practice evolved from a simple process to a more complex one involving laws and systems of authority, mankind created for itself the very struggle of social progress, both freeing and limiting itself from different forms of oppression. With social factors now playing a major role in human behavior and development, the evolution of mankind has forever changed from a slow, purely biological evolutionary process, to a social phenomenon with much greater potential for rapid change. With the development of humans now in the hands of social conditioning, the task of defining humanity's limits and potentials has thus become a new question entirely: how have human societies evolved in terms of social progress?

The Trajectory of Social Progress

In order to really understand and measure social progress, a common understanding must be established. The idea of social progress is generally inferred to include freedom and justice for all people, as well as a reduction of suffering from both natural and human causes. A society that has reached the zenith of social progress would ideally be one that meets all the basic requirements to sustain life for all people, offer freedom and opportunities for people to do what

they like and enrich their lives, and do so with a sense of fairness so that equal action leads to equal results for all people, be it the rewards of hard work, or the punishment for crime, based on merit rather than other factors such as race or status at birth. These ideas of social progress seem to beckon the advancement of a society that fairly offers the best quality of life for all people. But in order to really measure this abstract, loosely defined idea of "social progress" there must be some quantifiable outline set forth. The Social Progress Index (n.d.) aims to do that, and was created to measure the quality of a country based on social factors, instead of solely Gross Domestic Product. The index includes three main categories: Basic Human Needs, Foundations of Wellbeing, and Opportunity. Each category contains several subcategories that contain a number of quantifiable measures. For example, the category of Basic Human Needs includes: Nutrition and Basic Medical Care (Undernourishment, Depth of food deficit, Maternal mortality rate, and Child mortality rate), Water and Sanitation (Access to piped water, Rural access to improved water source, and Access to improved sanitation facilities), Shelter (Availability of affordable housing, Access to electricity, Quality of electrical supply, Household air pollution attributable deaths), and Personal Safety (Homicide rate, Level of violent crime, Perceived criminality, Political terror, and Traffic deaths). The Foundations of Wellbeing category includes: Access to Basic Knowledge (Adult literacy rate, Primary school enrollment, Lower secondary school enrollment, Upper secondary school enrollment, and Gender parity in secondary enrollment), Access to Information and Communication (Mobile telephone subscriptions, Internet users, and Press freedom index), Health and Wellness (Life expectancy, Premature deaths from non-communicable diseases, Obesity rate, Outdoor air pollution attributable deaths, and Suicide rate), and Ecosystem Sustainability (Greenhouse gas emissions, Water withdrawals as a percentage of resources, Biodiversity and habitat). Lastly, Opportunity

includes Personal Rights (Political rights, Freedom of speech, Freedom of assembly/association, Freedom of movement, and Private property rights), Personal Freedom and Choice (Freedom over life choices, Freedom of religion, Early marriage, Satisfied demand for contraception, and Corruption), Tolerance and Inclusion (Tolerance for immigrants, Tolerance for homosexuals, Discrimination and violence against minorities, Religious tolerance, and Community safety net), and Access to Advanced Education (Years of tertiary schooling, Women's average years in school, Inequality in the attainment of education, and Globally ranked universities). This data is then added together into an overall score, and countries can be ranked based on overall score or on individual items.

Though this index is rather comprehensive and can serve as a great tool for measuring social progress, it is also relatively new and lacks historical data for comparison. Nevertheless, many of these items can be easily shown to have improved consistently throughout history. Most of the items within the Basic Human Needs category, for instance, have clearly developed positively over time, such as access to food and safe water (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2015; United States Department of Agricultures Economic Research Service, 2016), homicide rates (Our World in Data, 2016), levels of violent crime (Gallup, 2011), access to affordable housing, medical care, maternal and child mortality rates (Develop Policy Centre, 2013; World Health Organization, 2016), and access to shelter and electricity. Likewise, most aspects of the Foundations of Wellbeing category have without a doubt improved, such as literacy rate (Our World in Data, 2016), primary and secondary school enrollment, gender parity in secondary enrollment, access to telephones and the Internet, and life expectancy (World Health Organization, 2014). The Opportunity category is a bit trickier, since much of the items are political and can change with the tides of politics, such as tolerance for immigrants and levels

of corruption. However, from a larger historical perspective, particularly in the past few centuries, public political power has increased, and personal rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, and religion have become almost universally accepted standards, with few only a exceptions, and have become ingrained as foundational pillars of most countries' legal systems. Though aspects of the Opportunity category such as tolerance and inclusion may be great struggles still to this day for even the most developed countries, the political interest and demand for civil rights over the past few centuries has shown an overall upward trajectory, and movements such as the Civil Rights movement and Black Lives Matter constantly emerge to pick up where previous efforts left off, demanding legal reform to achieve true equality of opportunity step-by-step. Even the prevalence of political corruption shows promising signs, as the technological boom of the information age has allowed for easier exposure of government scandals and greater ability for populations to share information and democratically unite, as shown by the efforts of WikiLeaks and the role of Twitter during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. These improvements also go hand in hand with the increase in tertiary schooling, both in general (Our World in Data, 2016) and for women in particular across the world.

Of course, there are caveats to this unyieldingly optimistic outlook. There are items within the Index that have faltered in progress or even declined in recent decades. Items related to personal health and the environment, such as obesity, air pollution, and ecosystem sustainability, are topics of particular concern in recent times, and have knowingly worsened as a product of modern lifestyles. On the other hand, as a reaction to these growing concerns, these issues are currently within the public's awareness and political interest and are becoming priorities. Every era has its own problems particular to the times, be it the explosion of plagues in medieval times, the rise of slavery in colonial history, or the environmental destruction of the

industrial era, yet through political action or scientific advancement, these issues are overcome, and the trajectory of progress throughout history is collectively positive overall regardless. These kinds of progressive, social changes have occurred because they have been in democratic interest, and will continue to be. It is within the overall social interest of mankind to address problems of inequality and injustice, not only on an individual level, but on a systematic and even global scale as well, and as long as there is awareness of these issues, they will eventually be dealt with.

Social Progress Positively Shapes Human Psychology

At this point, it is important to question how these advancements reflect on the development of human psychology. Which cultural changes are relevant to psychological change? Are these changes socially minded, or is this "social progress" simply based on personal interest? Theoretically, even the most basic changes to any society should have some effect on the way its citizens perceive, evaluate, and interact with the world. Some changes, such as crime and literacy rates, may be more obvious signs of psychological change, though others less so. For example, the increased availability of food and shelter, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, allows once impoverished people to focus less on their own personal survival and more on social issues and the needs of others. This is evidenced by the large number of aid programs supported by developed countries that aim to help countries stuck in the cycle of poverty. It is also important to note that much of these increases in food, shelter, or medicine have not been isolated, completely self-sufficient developments, but have often been collaborative efforts that have benefited many societies other than just one. The effort to eradicate polio, for example, was not isolated solely within the United States, but was aimed to help eliminate the disease on a global scale. Even in the case of war, countries band together to stop harmful ideologies and

protect human rights, such as the fight against Nazi Germany in World War II or the numerous attempts to instill Democracies in place of Dictatorships in other countries, just another example of human kind's use of preemptive aggression to select out socially harmful behaviors. Even in the world of business and economics, where personal gain is often seen as the main goal, the modern rise of globalization forces individuals, groups, or even whole societies to act in ways that support mutual interest, with non-zero sums, where both sides benefit. For example, stability in the Middle East is of great concern to the safety of the United States, which influences US foreign policy and discourages strong, violent, military action. In another example, a businessman from one country must learn to be courteous and understanding of people from other cultures in order to negotiate international trade, thus discouraging racist attitudes and behaviors (Wright, 2006). In these ways and more, social progress is not only an advancement of one country or the next, but a unified struggle to help each other on a larger scale, which continually reshapes societies to support cross-cultural social coherency and expand empathy from a simple kinship, or family/tribe level, to a more globalized scale of morality (Wilbur, 2001). This upward trajectory of social progress provides reason to believe that human societies will continue to develop in positive, socially minded ways, which will in turn reshape human worldviews, psychologies, and behaviors.

Conclusion

In an age of instant communication, today's people are bombarded with news of global destruction, violence, and corruption with historically unprecedented frequency. Police brutality can be recorded and made viral in minutes, government secrets can be hacked from servers and exposed in mass proportions, and people can watch the rapid melting of Antarctic glaciers from nearly anywhere on the planet. The injustices of the world, once known only to those oppressed

themselves, are now instantly blasted across the media outlets worldwide, practically shoved in our faces. It is easy to see why such circumstances can lead to a rather pessimistic perception of social progress. The rise of the Internet and mass media and the effects of globalization can arguably give off the impression that there is much more injustice happening in the world now than ever before; however, this perspective is skewed. The occurrence of issues such as political corruption, violence, and racial injustice are by no means new or more frequent; the information age has merely allowed for more transparency for problems around the world. In another light, the mere coverage in these issues can be seen as a major milestone for social progress, whereas many of these issues existed but were not of political interest in the past. In fact, the interconnectivity of the modern era may actually be one of the greatest catalysts for social progress in human history. Despite modern cynicism, social progress has continually increased from a broad historical perspective and will certainly continue to do so, especially in the current era of instant information, exponential technological progress, and mass connectivity on a global scale.

Unfortunately, many remain skeptical of the future of social progress, simply because of the belief that human nature is inherently limiting. Whether the conversation centers on the feasibility of socialism, the permanence of prejudice, the possibilities for a sustainable world, or the eradication of corruption, many people still believe that human nature itself is some underlying limiting factor, the bane of idealism itself, the unbreakable roadblock in the face of a unified, sustainable, fair, and just world. Yet these beliefs are inherently flawed. Social progress has not only continued to increase throughout human history, but has shaped human psychology and behavior in ways that has allows humans to come together, form societies, select out anti-social traits and behaviors, and rapidly reshape humanity through cultural rather than biological

evolution. By reshaping societies in positive, pro-social ways throughout history, humans have reshaped the way they perceive, comprehend, evaluate, and react to the world in ways that encourage social cohesiveness and world-centric empathy. If the trajectory of social and human progress is to continue, there is good reason to believe that it will continue to do so, not only reshaping our societies, but reshaping the possibilities of the human species itself.

References

Arnett, J. J. (2008). The neglected 95%: Why American psychology needs to become less American. *American Psychologist, 63*(7), 602-614. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.63.7.602

Baichwall, J. (Producer, Director). (2006). *Manufactured Landscapes* [Motion Picture]. Canada: Foundry Films.

Candland, D. K. (1993). *Feral children and clever animals: Reflections on human nature*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Culture. (2011). In *Merriam-Webster.com*. Retrieved May 27, 2011, from http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture

Develop Policy Centre. (2013). [Line graph illustration of infant and neonatal mortality rates from 1990-2012]. Child mortality declining, but much more work to do. Retrieved from: http://devpolicy.org/in-brief/child-mortality-declining-but-much-more-work-to-d-20130913-1/

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Signorielli, N., & Morgan, M. (1980). Aging with television: Images on television drama and conceptions of social reality. Journal of Communication, 30(l).

Gallup. (2011). [Line graph illustration of United States crime rates]. U.S. violent crime rate, U.S. Justice Department of Statistics, 1973-2010. Retrieved from: http://www.gallup.com/poll/150464/americans-believe-crime-worsening.aspx

Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 33*(2-3), 61.

International Food Policy Research Institute. (2015). [Bar graph illustration of GHI scores]. Snapshots of hunger in the developing world 2015 Global Hunger Index (GHI).

Retrieved from: http://www.ifpri.org/publication/snapshots-hunger-developing-world-2015-global-hunger-index-ghi

Kieran Healy. (2012). [Line graph illustration of assault deaths per population]. America is a violent country. Retrieved from: https://kieranhealy.org/blog/archives/2012/07/20/america-is-a-violent-country/

LaSalle, M., Baker, K., & Grady, P. (2007, July). "FILM CLIPS / Also opening today" [Review of the films *Interview*, by S. Buscemi: *Manufactured Landscapes*, by J. Baichwall: *Falling for Grace*, by F.A. Lee]. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Retrieved from. http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/FILM-CLIPS-Also-opening-today-2580576.php#flick

Littleford, L. N., & Kite, M. E. (2011). Experiences of sexual minorities in diverse cultures. In K. D. Keith (Ed.), *Cross-cultural psychology: Contemporary themes and perspectives* (pp.235-256). Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.

Matsumoto, D., & Hwang, H. S. (2011). Culture, emotion, and expression. In K. D. Keith (Ed.), *Cross-cultural psychology: Contemporary themes and perspectives* (pp.331-343). Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.

Molitory, A., & Hsu, H. (2011). Child development across cultures. In K. D. Keith (Ed.), *Cross-cultural psychology: Contemporary themes and perspectives* (pp.75-119). Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.

Our World in Data. (2016). [Line graph illustration of homicides rates from a global perspective]. Homicides per 100.00 people per year, 1800-2010. Retrieved from: https://ourworldindata.org/homicides/

Our World in Data. (2016). [Line graph illustration of increase of education on a global

level]. Global rise of education since 1950. Retrieved from: https://ourworldindata.org/global-rise-of-education/

Our World in Data. (2016). [Line graph illustration of literacy rates from a global perspective]. Literacy rates around the world from the 15th century to the present. Retrieved from: https://ourworldindata.org/literacy/

Phillips, W. L. (2011). Cross-cultural differences in visual perception of color, illusions, depth, and pictures. In K. D. Keith (Ed.), *Cross-cultural psychology: Contemporary themes and perspectives* (pp.160-180). Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.

Ratner, C. (2006). *Cultural psychology: A perspective on psychological functioning and social reform*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Social Progress Index. (n.d.). Retrieved March 13, 2016, from http://www.socialprogressimperative.org/data/spi

United States Department of Agricultures Economic Research Service. (2016). [Line graph illustration of percent personal income spent on food in the United States from 1960-2014]. American's budget shares devoted to food have flattened in recent years. Retrieved from: http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/detail.aspx?chartId=40094&ref=collection&embed=True

Vygotsky, L. S. (2004). The development of thinking and formation of concepts in the adolescent. In R. W. Rieber & D. K. Robinson (Eds.), *The essential Vygotsky* (pp. 415-470). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.

Wilber, K. (2001). *A theory of everything: An integral vision for business, politics, science, and spirituality*. Boston: Shambhala.

Wilkins, A. S., Wrangham, R. W., & Fitch, W. T. (2014, July 01). The "domestication syndrome" in mammals: A unified explanation based on neural crest cell behavior and genetics. *Genetics, 197*(3), 795-808. doi:10.1534/genetics.114.165423

World Bank Group. (2013.) [Line graph illustration of increase in female tertiary school enrollment on a global level]. School enrollment, tertiary, female (% gross). Retrieved from: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR.FE

World Health Organization. (2014). [Bar graph illustration of increased life expectancies from 1990-2012]. *World health statistics 2014.* 45. Retrieved from: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/112738/1/978924 0692671_eng.pdf?ua=1

World Health Organization. (2016). [Line graph illustration of maternal mortality rates globally from 1990-2015]. Maternal mortality. Retrieved from: http://www.who.int/gho/maternal_health/mortality/maternal/en/index1.html

Wrangham, R. (2014, October). Did homo sapiens self-domesticate? In T. Deacon & R. Kluender (Chair), *Domestication and human evolution.* Symposium conducted at the Center for Academic Research and Training in Anthropogeny, La Jolla, CA.

Wright, R. (2006, February). Robert Wright: Progress is not a zero-sum game [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_wright_on_optimism?language=en#t-1130971